

## OCTOBER 1 2024 FATHER JOHN BERTAO

As at the beginning of the Mass, the Gospel readings are undoubtedly beautiful, especially those from Job and others. However, I thought it might be beneficial for us to focus a little bit on a remarkable individual: St. Therese of the Child Jesus.

In sharing a personal example, I want to express how I relate to her. For many years before I applied to St. Augustine's Seminary, I traveled to various places in search of my vocation. Among those places, I visited Fatima a couple of times and returned to the village where I was born, hoping to find clarity. During those visits, I met with friends and several priests to gather their perspectives on the priesthood. Their opinions were numerous, and, for the most part, quite helpful.

Despite my search, I was unsure of what I was truly looking for. Eventually, I joined a group of friends and colleagues who were also exploring their own callings in life, yet we too had little success.

The question I grappled with was, "How can I best serve the Lord in this world?" At that point, the vocations director of the Archdiocese of Toronto suggested that I take a solitary retreat at the Monastery of Mount Carmel of the Society of the Little Flower, located in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Although I had no desire to join a monastery or become a religious, I found a profound peace among both the residents and the retreat-goers there. I was especially drawn to the famous chapel, where some relics of St. Therese are displayed.

That peace reassured me that my vocation was to serve Jesus Christ through His church as a priest, and to serve with love. Since that retreat, I have delved deeply into learning about this young lady, as much as possible, despite the many years that separate us. The more I learned about her, the more I felt connected to her story and mission.

One of the most striking things I discovered about St. Therese is that she was also searching for her vocation, which she defined simply: “My vocation is to love.” St. Therese was the youngest of her sisters, most of whom also entered the convent. Although she wanted to follow in their footsteps, she was initially prevented from doing so due to her age. Undeterred, she even sought the Holy Father's approval for an exception.

What makes her story special to me is that it mirrors my own search for purpose and clarity. I found that one of the writings I read resonated deeply with my questions: “We have grown used to the idea that just as there are people with talents for sport or scholarship, the rest of us can only admire them without trying to keep up.”

Many of us, myself included, can feel discouraged, thinking, "I can't do any better; this is just who I am." This sentiment often leads to resignation and even despair because we feel incapable of achieving greatness compared to others.

However, St. Therese challenged that notion. Although she faced limitations—being too young to join the convent and struggling with physical and psychological vulnerabilities—she remained resolute. She viewed her greatest saints as towering giants, impossible to reach, while she felt like a mere grain of sand.

Yet, she chose not to be disheartened. Inspired by St. John of the Cross's teachings, St. Therese understood that God does not inspire desires that are unattainable. God will not burden us beyond our abilities.

She often reflected on the Book of Proverbs, which spoke to her: “If anyone is very little one, let him come to me.” St. Therese discovered that in her littleness, she could find strength in God's care.

In God's eyes, we are all significant, special, and gifted. You are special, created by God for a reason. It's essential not to sell yourself short or diminish your worth, as St. Therese reminds us

We need to trust in God's plan for us. The wisdom of the Church speaks volumes about St. Therese's enduring message of love and humility. To conclude, I'd like to share something from her diary. She once remarked that a priest told her her inclination to fall asleep during prayers was a sign of lacking fervor, which should make her desolate. She responded, "I am not desolate. Little children are just as pleasing to their parents when asleep as they are when awake. They are still loved."

This reflects an important lesson: we all encounter daily opportunities for grace, even when we are unaware. The more we love God, the more we will recognize His presence in our lives.

So, dear friends in Christ, if you find that you can't advance towards Heaven in giant strides, remember that every small step counts. Our weaknesses should not be an excuse for mediocrity. Rather, let us aspire to do great things in small, loving ways.

Love, love, love. St. Therese, the Little Flower of Jesus, pray for us and guide us in love. Amen.